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Recruiting Fathers to Parenting Programs: Advice from Dads and Fatherhood Program Providers

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Abstract

The benefits of high-quality father-child relationships for fathers and children alike are well documented. While evidence suggests parenting programs can improve the quality of father-child relationships, few fathers participate in such programs. This qualitative study aims to fill the gap in knowledge on best practices for recruiting urban African American fathers, a group of fathers with unique parenting challenges, to parenting programs. Focus groups were conducted with 29 fathers to gain their perspectives on recruitment strategies. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with a nationwide sample of 19 fatherhood program providers to learn about their most successful recruitment strategies. Recruitment strategies based on emergent themes from the focus groups and interviews are presented here. Themes included using word-of-mouth recruitment, increasing advertising, targeting advertising specifically to urban African American fathers, providing transportation and incentives, recruiting through the courts, collaborating with other community agencies, and offering parenting programming along with other programming valued by fathers such as employment assistance. Implications for developing strategies for recruiting urban African American fathers to parenting programs are discussed.

Keywords

Fathers; parenting programs; recruitment

1. Introduction

Children experience more positive outcomes and fewer negative outcomes when they experience positive father-child relationships, regardless of whether the father resides in the home. These children have fewer behavior problems, less psychological distress, and are less likely to engage in risky or antisocial behaviors compared to children who experience negative father-child relationships (Black, Dubowitz, & Starr, 1999; Harris, Furtenburg, & Marmer, 1998). One strategy to enhance father-child relationships is through father

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participation in parenting programs. They have been shown to increase fathers' accessibility to their children, the amount of direct involvement with their children, and their support of children's learning, while also increasing children's math readiness and decreasing parent reports of children's problem behaviors (Fagan & Iglesias, 1999).

Although parenting programs benefit fathers and their children, recruitment of fathers to such programs remains a challenge for fatherhood program providers (Bayley, Wallace, & Choudhry, 2009). Further, there is insufficient published research to guide recruitment efforts. The purpose of this paper is to present strategies for recruiting urban African American fathers to parenting programs that emerged from data collected via focus groups with 29 urban African American fathers and semi-structured interviews with 19 fatherhood service providers.

Fathers today face challenges not experienced in previous generations. First, the number of children who grow up in single parent, typically mother-headed, households has surged in recent decades and is now estimated to be 35% (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011), making it difficult for many fathers to maintain consistent involvement with their children. Second, the changing nature of the family, with more women working outside the home, has altered the traditional father role and how fatherhood is defined (Cornille, Barlow, & Cleveland, 2005). The definition of fatherhood has shifted from father as breadwinner to father as active parent and nurturer (Cornille et al., 2005; Lamb, 2000). This new conceptualization of fatherhood may cause role confusion for men whose own fathers did not model this behavior. Finally, more children than ever live in poverty, which puts them at risk for negative behavioral and educational outcomes (United States Census Bureau, 2011). Consequently, poverty and its associated risks to children poses additional parenting challenges to many fathers.

Urban African American fathers experience these parenting challenges more frequently than other groups of fathers. Sixty-seven percent of African American children are currently being raised primarily by their mothers (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011). This is nearly double the rate of all children, as noted above. African American children make up the largest racial or ethnic group of those living in poverty, with 38% of African American children living in poverty compared to 35% of Hispanic children and 12% of white children (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011). Across races, mothers with custody of children may serve as gatekeepers, making it difficult for some fathers to consistently gain access to their children and provide nurturance to them (Bloomer, Ann Sipe, & Ruedt, 2002). Additionally, the stress caused by constantly struggling to make ends meet, poverty can also limit the amount of time and resources a father can spend on his child (Threlfall, Seay, & Kohl, 2013), which may add to parenting stress among urban fathers.

Despite these challenges, urban African American fathers are in a position to positively influence their children's lives. Research consistently shows that high quality father involvement, regardless of whether or not the father is living in the same home as his child, can alter children's emotional, behavioral, and educational trajectories for the better. In a meta analysis of 63 studies about non-resident father involvement and child wellbeing, feelings of closeness (operationalized by how close the father and child felt toward one

another) and authoritative parenting (listening to children's problems, giving advice, explaining rules, monitoring, being involved in school, and using non-coercive discipline) were positively associated with academic success and negatively associated with internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). Findings from this meta-analysis have been upheld in a more recent study on father involvement that also took mother involvement into account in their analyses. Flouri & Buchanan (2004) found high-quality father involvement was positively associated with academic achievement, independent of mother involvement. Moreover, father involvement is associated with delinquent behavior. A longitudinal study of urban families showed that increases in non-resident father involvement, reported by adolescents and mothers, were linked to reductions in adolescents' self reports of delinquent behavior and mothers' reports of delinquent behavior on the delinquency subscale of the Child Behavior Checklist (Coley & Medeiros, 2007).

Given the parenting challenges that urban African American fathers face and our knowledge that high-quality father involvement impacts children positively, it is necessary that we improve efforts to recruit fathers to programs that help them overcome these challenges and improve father-child relationships.

1.1 Parenting programs

Parenting programs are a category of interventions designed to strengthen parenting competencies and improve parent-child interactions (Fletcher, Freeman, & Matthey, 2011). Research consistently demonstrates such programs are effective for improving parenting behavior and attitudes as well as children's behaviors (Barlow & Stewart-Brown, 2000; Kaminski, Valle, Filene, & Boyle, 2008). Effects have been particularly strong for improving parenting knowledge, parent attitudes, parenting self-efficacy and for improving children's internalizing behaviors (Kaminski et al., 2008).

Although the body of literature on parenting program effectiveness overwhelmingly focuses on mothers (Lundahl, Tollefson, Risser, & Lovejoy, 2008), a small number of studies indicate parenting programs also benefit fathers. One study of the Head Start curriculum adapted for fathers found that, after completion, fathers who were highly involved in the program spent more time with their children, had greater access to their children, and were more supportive of their children's learning compared to fathers who were less involved in the program (Fagan & Iglesias, 1999). An evaluation of the DADs Family Project found participation by fathers led to reductions in harsh and physical punishment between pre- and post-test (Cornille et al., 2005). Fathers of children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) who participated in a parenting program used more praise and less negative talk toward their children compared to those in the control group (Fabiano et al., 2012). Similarly, a study of children with oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) and their parents found that fathers who participated in parent training displayed less negative parenting, including using fewer critical statements and less harsh discipline (Reid, Webster-Stratton, & Hammond, 2003).

1.2 Low rates of father participation in parenting programs

While research on their effectiveness remains scant, the number of parenting programs available to fathers has grown in recent years, partly as a result of major policy changes for urban families. For example, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), also known as “welfare reform”, led to an increase in programs for fathers, including the Responsible Fatherhood Demonstration Projects (Anderson, Kohler, & Lettiecq, 2002), many of which include a parenting component in their curriculum. More recently, federal policy has prioritized the creation of support services focusing on responsible fatherhood (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). For example, the Claims Resolution Act of 2010 will provide $150 million, across five years, for programs promoting fatherhood practices that lead to an increase in positive parenting behaviors and healthy father-child relationships (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Emphasis was also placed on providing parenting assistance to fathers experiencing economical difficulties. Under the Claims Resolution Act, Pathways to Responsible Fatherhood Grants were awarded to projects aimed toward assisting low-income fathers. Yet despite this increase in opportunities for participation by fathers in parenting programs, fathers remain under-represented in these programs (Bayley et al., 2009).

Recruitment of fathers into parenting programs is challenging. Studies on rates of father participation in programs reflects this difficulty. A meta-analysis of the parenting program Triple P, which targets both fathers and mothers, analyzed randomized controlled trials of Triple P that either specifically targeted fathers or included fathers (Fletcher et al., 2011). The study found that out of 4959 participants in 21 studies across several countries, only 20% of the participants were fathers (Fletcher et al., 2011). Furthermore, a systematic review of father participation in child maltreatment prevention programs, all of which involved a parenting education component, found father participation rates to be less than 30% (Smith, Duggan, Bair-Merritt, & Cox, 2012). These studies reviewed father participation without differentiating between races and ethnic groups. While data on rates of African American father participation in parenting programs are scant, there is sufficient evidence to speculate that participation rates among minority parents may be lower than among other groups. Studies examining the utilization of universally available parent training programs found that rates of enrollment could be linked to participant characteristics, with immigrant and minority groups tending to be less likely to enroll in parent training programs (Cunningham & Boyle, 2000; Cunningham, Bremner, & Boyle, 1995; Spoth & Redmond, 1993). For example, among fathers participating in Early Head Start programs, African American children were less likely to have a resident father (30%) compared to white (48%), Hispanic (57%), and Native American (47%) children (Raikes & Bellotti, 2006). Further, non-resident fathers were the least likely to be involved in Early Head Start—30% reported some participation but only 14% reported high participation (Raikes & Bellotti, 2006). Because only 14% of non-resident fathers had high participation rates, and because 70% of the African American children in the study had non-resident fathers (Raikes & Bellotti, 2006), it is reasonable to infer that the fathers of the African American children were more likely to have low participation rates than the fathers of children of other races.

The underrepresentation of urban African American fathers as participants in parenting programs is concerning. A better understanding of factors contributing to these low participation rates is necessary and an emerging body of evidence has begun to document some of the barriers. One qualitative study of barriers to participation in parenting programs found that urban African American fathers were often unaware of programs (Lee, Brisebois, & Banks, 2011). A second large qualitative study (n = 769) conducted with fathers participating in an experimental study of Early Head Start found many fathers perceived the program to be designed for mothers (Summers, Boller, & Raikes, 2004). Some fathers in their study also expressed a reluctance to seek parenting support from any formal source and suggested that support-seeking may be viewed by men as a failure and may conflict with some men's view of their own masculinity (Summers et al., 2004).

Research on father participation in other types of programs suggests men may avoid seeking support from formal sources because they perceive the social services environment to be untrustworthy, uninterested in, or even hostile towards fathers. Within child protective services (CPS), studies have found that caseworkers treat mothers and fathers differently. For example, in a study of families whose children had been placed in out of home care, caseworkers demonstrated greater outreach to mothers when formulating permanency plans and viewed mothers' problems as more important than fathers' problems (Franck, 2001). Franck (2001) and Huebner, Werner, Hartwig, White, & Shewa (2008) suggested caseworkers perceived concentrating outreach efforts on mothers produced a greater return on their investment. Similarly, another sample of CPS caseworkers reported they considered fathers to be an "afterthought," treated them with suspicion, and with greater severity (O'Donnell, Johnson, D'Aunno, & Thornton, 2005). Caseworkers also perceived fathers' mistrust and avoidance of child welfare service providers to be associated with fear of other consequences (e.g., reincarceration, or being found delinquent on child support payments that they were unable to or did not want to make; O'Donnell et al., 2005). This research has been conducted with samples of fathers in settings that commonly work with mothers and is responding to allegations of child abuse and neglect; much less is known about barriers to participation in parenting programs that are provided at agencies that specifically target fathers for services and that are more supportive in nature. Overall, it is difficult to draw conclusions on the barriers to participation in parenting programs and how these barriers affect recruitment efforts in any setting with the very limited amount of research on these barriers.

Currently, no published study specifically addresses how urban African American fathers may be successfully recruited into parenting programs. We aim to fill this gap in knowledge by: 1) exploring urban African American fathers' perceptions of parenting programs and potential recruitment methods to identify which methods hold the most promise for increasing participation in such programs, and 2) identifying the most successful recruitment methods fatherhood program providers use to recruit fathers to parenting programs.

2. Research Design and Methods

2.1 Study design

The current study reports on data from a larger study undertaken by a university-based agency partnership in one Midwestern city to develop and test an approach to engage low income African American fathers in an empirically supported parenting intervention – Triple P (Positive Parenting Program; Sanders, Markie-Dadds, & Turner, 2003). To answer the above questions, data were collected from two sources: African American fathers in focus groups (n = 29) and fatherhood program providers via telephone interviews (n = 19). All procedures involving data collection and management were approved by the Human Research Protection Office of Washington University in St. Louis. Fathers and fatherhood program providers were informed of their rights as research participants and provided informed consent prior to study participation.

2.2 Father focus groups recruitment, sample, and procedure

Men participating in the focus groups met the following inclusion criteria: (a) biological fathers of at least one child between the ages of 4 and 12, (b) over 18 years of age, and (c) provided stable care for their children, either in the form of a resident father or as a non-resident father with visitation at least twice per month. Our sample was limited to fathers of children in this age group because this is the target age of the Triple P intervention under consideration in the parent study. Men who were in a caregiver role, but not the biological father (e.g., grandfather, live in boyfriend of child's mother) were excluded from the study.

Prospective participants were recruited into the focus groups via flyers posted and distributed at locations known to be frequented by our target population (e.g., barbershops, restaurants, and retail stores). Interested men were instructed to contact a member of the project team and eligibility was ascertained at that time. Fifty-one men contacted the study team about focus group participation; 18 did not meet eligibility requirements and four could not participate due to date or time conflicts. A total of 29 men participated in five focus groups; their demographics are shown in Table 1.

The purpose of the focus groups, which were 90 minutes in length, was to explore fathers' perceptions about parenting programs and strategies to engage fathers in these programs. Specifically, the focus group interview guide sought to elicit information about father's: 1) knowledge and opinions of parenting programs, 2) perceptions about inhibitors to participation in parenting programs, 3) perceptions about facilitators to participation in parenting programs, 4) opinions about the Triple P materials, and 5) identifying ways to engage fathers in Triple P. In order to elicit specific feedback about Triple P materials, participants watched a short clip from the DVD that is part of Triple P and reviewed a program marketing brochure, as well as a participant manual (Sanders & Pidgeon, 2005). Questions related to this material were asked after participants completed these activities.

All focus group facilitators received comprehensive training by a cultural anthropologist. Training sessions included strategies for reducing threats to the trustworthiness of qualitative data, including strategies for reducing researcher and respondent bias, (Padgett, 2008). Focus groups were held at varying times (evenings, weekdays and Saturdays) at a

community-based agency providing support services to fathers. Fathers were given a $25 gift card from Wal-Mart as compensation for focus group participation. Fathers in need of transportation assistance were provided with bus passes. Focus groups were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

2.3 Fatherhood program providers interview recruitment, sample, and procedure

Fatherhood program providers employed within stand-alone father support agencies and fatherhood programs embedded within larger social service agencies were recruited to participate in telephone interviews. To identify fatherhood program providers, an exhaustive, nationwide list of agencies providing parenting programs to fathers was generated through an Internet search, including those identified by the National Fatherhood Initiative website. Local provider agencies were also included. One hundred eighty-three fatherhood programs were identified. To ensure representation from all geographic regions, programs were stratified into four regions and six programs from each region were randomized and invited to participate. When a selected agency declined to participate or we were unable to make contact, a replacement agency was selected from within the same region.

A member of the research team contacted each agency and asked to speak with the executive director (ED), program manager, or someone in a comparable position to obtain permission to contact direct service providers and obtain their names and email addresses. A letter from the chief executive officer (CEO) of our community partner, describing the study and containing contact information of the CEO and study PI, was emailed to potential respondents. Service providers were instructed to respond by email if they were interested in participating and that they could contact either individual with questions about the study. If providers did not respond, we attempted to contact them by phone up to three times to verbally invite them to participate. Agencies were excluded from the study if no contact was made by the third attempt.

We invited 36 agencies to participate. Contact attempts with the ED or designee at nine agencies were unsuccessful; six declined participation. Four EDs expressed interest in participation, but attempts to interview the direct service providers were unsuccessful. Two agencies were excluded because they no longer provided services to fathers. A total of 15 agencies participated in the study for a participation response rate of 41.7%. Additionally, two service providers were interviewed from four of the agencies; therefore, 19 service providers from 15 agencies were interviewed.

Interviewed providers were African American (n = 9, 47.4%), Hispanic (n = 2, 10.5%), and white (n = 8, 42.1%). Gender was mixed; just over half of the providers were male (n = 11, 57.9%) and 42.1% (n = 8) were female. On average, the providers were 48.5 (*SD* = 11.3) years of age and most (n = 17, 89.5%) had a college or graduate degree.

Interviewers were also trained by a cultural anthropologist on topics such as ways to reduce interviewer and respondent bias. The telephone interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and inquired about recruitment, attendance, and engagement in fatherhood programs, and the role of social support in their programs. Engagement was specifically defined as active

participation, such as being involved in discussions, appearing animated, paying attention to content and providing support and feedback to other fathers. To compensate providers for their time, they were invited to participate in a webinar about recruiting and retaining fathers in services that was presented by the CEO of the community partner and the PI of the project. As with the focus groups, the interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

2.4 Data analysis for focus groups and telephone interviews

An inductive approach, which allows themes to emerge from the data, was used to analyze the data from focus groups and interviews (see Krueger, 1998). Steps were taken to increase the trustworthiness of the data. First, to reduce bias during analysis, analytic triangulation, which is achieved by using multiple coders, was employed (Padgett, 2008). Second, regular peer debriefing and support (PDS) meetings were held throughout the coding process (Padgett, 2008). Multiple team members read the transcripts from one focus group and identified and recorded emerging themes. Discussion in PDS meetings among members about the list of themes informed the development of a preliminary codebook. During the readings of subsequent transcripts, each team member evaluated the utility of the codebook by constantly comparing the codebook to newly emerging themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) -- a process that was repeated until the codebook was finalized. Transcripts were then coded by a single team member using NVivo (version 8). To ensure agreement in the coding process, coding summary reports were generated and circulated to team members for evaluation. A conceptual cluster matrix was then generated (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The matrix contained quotations and text phrases organized by theme (columns) and focus group (rows). This allowed the team to evaluate the saliency of particular themes among participants within a focus group and across focus groups, or across interviews. The same analytic approach was also used for the analysis of the transcripts of the telephone interviews with the fatherhood program providers.

3. Results

3.1 Summary of findings: Themes

Four themes emerged from focus groups with fathers and five themes emerged from fatherhood program provider interviews. Consistencies and differences between what fathers perceived as important for recruitment and what fatherhood program providers profess to practice became apparent. The first theme, which was shared by fathers and fatherhood program providers was “word of mouth recruitment.” The second theme, also shared by both fathers and fatherhood program providers was “targeted recruitment.” Two unique themes also emerged from the father focus groups. The first was “more advertising.” Although fathers agreed that targeted advertising is best, they also expressed the need for more advertising to increase awareness of parenting programs. The final theme expressed by fathers was “transportation and incentives,” two tangible offerings agencies might employ to recruit fathers.

Unique themes also emerged from the fatherhood program provider interviews. These themes focused on the organizational and system-level recruitment strategies the providers perceived to be most successful. The first of these was “recruitment through the courts.” In

addition to working with the courts, providers also stressed “collaborating with community partners.” The last theme which emerged from the provider interviews was “offer parenting along with something else.”

3.2 Word-of-mouth recruitment

Fathers and fatherhood program providers both stressed the importance of word-of-mouth recruitment. Fathers reported they wanted to hear about parenting programs from other fathers like themselves. In response to what might facilitate participation in a parenting program, one father expressed, “I would say word of mouth, people that you know, friends, family, whatever. Just let them know, ‘Hey, I'm going to this group. This is something that might help you’.” Another participant suggested using a “snowball” technique to recruit fathers:

> Get more involved...for instance, the brochures and the pamphlets that you have, to people who participate, maybe you could give 10 or 15 to another father and he passes them out to ten or fifteen more other fathers. And, everybody will start getting to know. Because it really is a lack of knowledge. If you don't know you don't know.

Focus group participants explicitly indicated that other African American fathers would be trusted over other types of recruiters. Hearing from another father who had been through the program and could vouch for its effectiveness was important to the fathers.

Similarly, fatherhood program providers also described word of mouth recruitment as their most effective strategy for recruiting fathers to parenting programs. Many providers asked fathers who had been through the program to recommend it to other fathers and some used program graduates in their formal recruitment procedures. Similarly to how fathers expressed a desire to hear from other fathers that the program works, providers clearly realized the strength of sending program graduates out to present evidence that a program is worthwhile to potential recruits. As one provider explained, “it's basically the good word of someone who receives some good service or service they valued. It is taken as evidence that this is a program worth approaching or enrolling in.” Another stated, “the most effective [strategy] is to have graduates of the program talk to other men who are interested in becoming better fathers and becoming better men.”

3.3 Targeted recruitment

The second theme that emerged in both father focus groups and fatherhood provider interviews was that a one-size-fits all recruitment strategy does not work with fathers. Recruitment targeted specifically to African American fathers is necessary to attract these fathers to programs. For example, flyers used to advertise programs should include pictures of African American men and language they can relate to. Fathers indicated that not only would materials designed specifically for urban African American fathers help them relate a potential parenting program, but such materials would also convey a message that the agency understands their unique needs. After viewing a standard Triple P brochure, one father suggested, “I would put a brother – I would put a Black man holding his son or daughter in there because that shows that you participate and you understand where we

come from, and it's about us." Another father acknowledged that slang verbiage may be inappropriate for advertising materials, but that materials still needed to be presented in a relatable manner. Specifically, he said "I mean you shouldn't have to put it in a slang form, but you might want to reword some things to where people who actually need them, will relate to them. 'You have multiple baby mammas? Baby mamma drama?'"

Fatherhood program providers also stressed the importance of targeted recruitment, especially targeting the locations that fathers frequent. Recruiting fathers in their own environments allows providers to talk with fathers on a regular basis and in an environment where they feel comfortable. For providers, this means familiarizing themselves with the community and targeting fathers in a non-intimidating way. One provider discussed this approach, "We reach fathers one-on-one on their territory, so to speak, so we go into recreation centers, places fathers frequent, so that the approach is less intimidating and less judging when they are approached." Another discussed the importance of targeting men in groups:

> All of our case managers are familiar with the community, the different types of places that some of our fathers would participate in, like the poolroom. Wherever there is a congregation of urban fathers who have children that they do not have in their home, the case managers go out and talk to those people on a regular basis.

Fathers and service providers were in agreement that recruitment of fathers to parenting programs requires a targeted approach. Fathers stressed they would respond best to marketing materials they could identify with, such as materials that featured photos of African American men, and service providers stressed targeting fathers in locations they frequent.

3.4 More advertising

The third theme, "more advertising," was unique to the fathers participating in focus groups. Most of the participants had very limited knowledge of parenting programs and some were completely unaware of the existence of these programs. Those who did have some knowledge of parenting programs perceived them to be for mothers, rich people, or people whose children have serious behavior problems. Fathers felt more advertising is needed to increase awareness of parenting programs for fathers. This theme was discussed frequently and in every focus group. One father referred to parenting programs as a "mystery of the unknown," and suggested that if providers put the information "out there...on billboards...where I could constantly see it," he would be more likely to "believe" in the program and even suggest his peers join him in attending. Another participant discussed the need for more information on parenting programs:

> Getting the information out there to fathers. I had no idea that this type of program had even existed for fathers. And I think the more information that is put out there for fathers, especially Black fathers, hopefully that would encourage them to want to come and participate.

Fathers suggested that advertising beyond handing out flyers is necessary and proposed using highly visible methods, such as billboards in their neighborhoods and, TV, radio,

newspaper advertising. “You can put the sign on the side of the bus, at the bus stop. Anything,” expressed one father, while another said, “If there's Newport advertisements on the corner, there should be parenting classes advertised on the corner.”

Overall, most fathers had very limited or inaccurate knowledge about parenting programs. Fathers stressed the need for more advertising to increase awareness of programs. Many indicated that simply distributing flyers is inadequate and suggested other methods such as the use of billboards, television, and radio.

3.5 Transportation and incentives

The final theme to emerge from focus groups with fathers concerned the tangible things fatherhood program providers could offer to increase father participation in parenting programs. Fathers expressed lack of transportation is a major obstacle to fathers’ participation in parenting programs. Fathers discussed the hectic pace of their day-to-day lives—the “running around” they must do to maintain family and work obligations—and that finding transportation to attend a parenting program would be another challenge in their day. Fathers indicated providing bus tickets would aid the recruitment efforts of providers. As one put it, “if I can't get there, it'd be nice for them to say, Here's a bus ticket for you to get here. And you want to get home when you do get here? Here.”

Fathers mentioned that incentives may be a means to increase participation. However, many further noted that incentives may get them to the program, but ultimately their own motivation to be a better parent is what will keep them there and engaged. Cash incentives or gift cards that could “help them with their situations,” were a common theme. One father, who admitted he had previously attended a parenting class because of a gift certificate only to find that once he began participating the gift certificate “didn't mean anything anymore because I actually liked it.” He still, however, stressed the importance of using the incentive to get fathers in the door. “Sometimes people have to think they are going to get something in order to ... come somewhere,” he explained.

3.6 Recruitment through the courts

Collaborative efforts and programming tactics were identified by fatherhood program providers as effective methods of recruiting fathers to parenting programs, although they were not mentioned by fathers as a means to recruit them. The first of these themes is “recruitment through the courts.” Program staff reported they make efforts to form relationships with judges and court personnel at the family courts in their areas and use these relationships to recruit men who are mandated by the court to attend a parenting program. “We have a system where we go to the court, and the family court, and all the judges know us very well. We've formed a relationship with them and they've allowed us to come to the courthouse,” one provider explained. Another provider stated, “we go into child support court in four different counties and we hear of non-custodial parents who may not be paying child support or have visitation issues or are not familiar with the rules.”

3.7 Collaborating with community partners

In addition to networking with court personnel, program providers also reported that forming relationships with and collaborating with other agencies in their communities were means to recruit fathers into their programs. Oftentimes, this meant sending marketing materials and electronic communication to other agencies in the area that serve families. This overall sentiment was summarized with one provider's statement:

> We send out fliers and registrations via email, to all the judges, all the court personnel...to the Department of Human Services, every single person in our community, in our county, that has any direct work with parents, fathers, and children.

3.8 Offer parenting along with something else

Finally, many fatherhood programs offered parenting along with another service that fathers view as valuable. A parenting component may be embedded in a larger program that offers services such as employment assistance, sessions on how to navigate the child support system, or GED preparation. For example, employment assistance is often a very valuable incentive to fathers and may be enough to get them to enroll in a program that then also educates on parenting skills. Further, if fathers are successful in securing employment after completing the program, they are more likely to recommend the program to their peers. One service provider explained, “if we're able to help them get employment, which is a big, big thing, then they tell their friends, and tell others, and then they come to us.” Other agencies reported taking a more targeted approach, catering to each individual father's needs. “Each person, we try to carve out their niche, what they need. Some need education. Some need jobs.” Although there was variation about which additional services were offered and how providers determined the services fathers often, the vast majority of providers interviewed indicated that parent skills training was embedded into other services. .

4. Discussion

4.1 Summary of results

This study had three aims. First, we wanted to explore the perspectives of urban African American fathers regarding best practices for recruiting them into parenting programs. Second, we sought to learn what fatherhood program providers considered best practices for recruitment. Finally, we aimed to integrate the perspectives of fathers and program providers to make recommendations for developing strategies to recruit these fathers into parenting programs. Important information was gleaned from the fathers and providers that can be used to enhance recruitment efforts.

Common themes emerged in the African American father focus groups and fatherhood program provider interviews. Both groups stressed word of mouth as a best practice for recruitment. Fathers wanted to hear about parenting programs from other fathers like themselves and service providers regularly sent fathers who had participated in their programs into the field to recruit future participants. These themes mirror implementation science literature, which considers the use of word-of-mouth recruitment, specifically face-

to-face interactions between prior program participants and those who might be suitable for program services, to be an effective strategy to improve recruitment (Caspe & Lopez, 2006; Spoth & Redmond, 2002). Reviews of parenting program effectiveness (Axford, Lehtonen, Kaoukji, Tobin, Berry, 2012; Peters et al., 2005; Whittaker & Cowley, 2010;) also suggest that face-to-face interactions serve as a mediator between interventions and those in need because the referrer influences how the program is first introduced to parents, which can ultimately contribute to the likelihood of parent enrollment and program participation (Axford et al., 2012; Peters, Calam, & Harrington, 2005; Whittaker & Cowley, 2010). This type of interaction can be effective in not only familiarizing parents with the content of program services, but can also aid in the development of parents' trust in the benefit of services because they are interacting with participants of the program.

Themes surrounding the importance of word-of-mouth are consistent with prior research examining factors that influence participation in family interventions (Caspe & Lopez, 2006; Kratochwill, McDonald, Levin, Young Bear-Tibbits, & Demaray, 2004), and also identified cultural sensitivity as a significant component in the recruitment process. Kumpfer, Alvarado, Smith, & Bellamy (2002) explored the effectiveness of family-based prevention services and found that cultural sensitivity, in the form of using recruiters and program providers who are representative of the cultural background of the targeted population (as well as other cultural adaptations) resulted in a 40% increase in recruitment and retention of participants in a prevention parenting intervention.

Fathers and providers in our study consistently reported fathers' desire to learn about the program from fathers similar to themselves. The importance of this recruitment strategy is corroborated by other research. In their qualitative study of urban African American fathers' barriers to participation in parenting programs, Lee and colleagues (2011) asked fathers where they prefer to get their parenting information. Fathers indicated that among all sources of information, they more readily seek out information from other fathers in their community (Lee et al., 2011). Additionally, research has shown that in general, urban fathers distrust social service agencies (Axford et al., 2012; Franck, 2001; Huebner et al., 2008; O'Donnell et al., 2005). Having another African American father serve as an intermediary between the program provider and the recruit may modify the distrust these fathers feel towards social service providers. Agencies seeking to increase recruitment of urban African American fathers should make efforts to involve program graduates in the recruitment process.

Fathers and fatherhood program providers both stressed the importance of advertising in recruitment efforts. Fathers reported they were unaware of the existence of parenting programs, which is consistent with findings from a qualitative study on barriers to father participation in parenting programs in the United Kingdom (Bayley et al., 2009). Aside from more advertising, fathers want to see advertising materials they can relate to, including the use of familiar vocabulary and images of African American men and children. Advertising materials that are designed specifically with urban African American fathers in mind are not only eye-catching to these fathers, but they also convey a message that an agency understands their unique needs, which in turn may increase these fathers' trust of the social services setting. Fatherhood program providers also discussed the use of advertising in

recruitment. The central theme in the interviews was that recruiters should advertise in locations frequented by fathers. Providers stressed meeting with men on their own turf in a non-intimidating way so that fathers feel comfortable.

Finally, fathers stressed the importance of transportation assistance and financial incentives such as gift cards, especially incentives that may help them make ends meet, in their decisions to enroll in a parenting program. These factors may be of particular importance for urban parents (Axford et al., 2012). Letting fathers who do not have their own vehicle know that transportation can be provided to get them to the program may encourage more of them to sign up. This accords with previous findings that those providers most successful in enrolling parents in their interventions work with families ahead of time to provide solutions to practical obstacles to attendance, including transportation (Ingoldsby, 2010).

Collaboration with the courts and other community agencies is an important strategy to recruit fathers. This is consistent with prior research indicating that collaborating with community partners on recruitment efforts is an effective, and in some cases essential, approach for recruiting parents into parenting programs (Axford et al., 2012; Pearson & Thurston, 2006; Spoth & Redmond, 2002). Community agencies making daily contact with the population targeted for the parenting program and familiar with processes in the local community can provide access to difficult to reach populations (Pearson & Thurston, 2006; Spoth, Clair, Greenberg, Redmond, & Shin, 2007).

Due to the common requirement that court-involved fathers attend a parenting program, recruiting from the courts is a logical strategy. As of 2008, 46 states mandate some form of parenting education after a parent files for divorce, separation, custody, and/or visitation (Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008). Fathers are also often mandated by the court to attend a parenting program when a case of child abuse or neglect or intimate partner violence has been brought against them (Greif, Finney, Greene-Joyner, Minor, & Stitt, 2007). Forming relationships with court personnel is a valuable strategy agencies may employ to increase their pool of potential recruits. Similarly, collaborating with other community agencies allows fatherhood program providers to cast a larger net when recruiting for parenting programs. Community partners are often willing to post recruitment materials and spread the word about parenting programs available to fathers. Finally, fatherhood program providers discussed a final recruitment strategy: embedding a parenting program within a broader program that also offers services such as employment assistance, GED preparation, or advice on navigating the child support system. While this is an effective strategy for many agencies, particularly those offering responsible fatherhood programs, agencies offering broader family support services that do not have the capacity to deliver employment or educations services, can learn much about recruiting African American fathers from the study findings within the context of the emerging literature on father recruitment into social services. Increased participation by fathers requires father-specific recruitment strategies that seek to specifically engage fathers – gender and racially sensitive advertising, active recruitment such as peer referrals and advertising in locations frequented by the targeted male population, and broadening organizational networks to include systems that serve men (e.g., family court, probation and parole, and job training).

4.2 Limitations

This study has many strengths. The qualitative methods we used yielded rich data we would have been unable to obtain in a quantitative study and fill a much-needed gap in our knowledge of recruiting urban African American fathers to parenting programs. As with most qualitative studies, our purposive sampling strategy may limit the generalizability of our findings. For example, our sample of fathers was comprised of individuals from one mediumsized, urban, metropolitan area. Rural fathers or fathers from larger or smaller cities may have different perspectives on recruitment methods. Additionally, participation in this study was limited to biological fathers and the findings may not generalize to step-fathers or other non-biological fathers. It is also possible that participating in a research study may have biased the responses of some of the fathers, especially with regard to the transportation and incentives theme. Transportation assistance, in the form of bus tickets, was offered to participants. Participants also received a $25 Wal-Mart gift card. It is possible that receipt of these items at the time of participation may have made these themes salient and, in turn, increased discussion of this theme.

Although a limitation of the study is the low response rate of fatherhood program providers, the stratified randomization of fatherhood service providers ensured we gained service provider perspectives from across the U.S. However, it is possible that the providers that participated in the study were those that were most capable of recruiting fathers. This may limit the generalizability of the interview findings to the larger population of fatherhood program providers. Finally, this study was exploratory in nature and provides a strong base for understanding strategies to recruit urban African American father to parenting programs. Future research is needed to empirically test the success of these recruitment strategies.

4.3 Conclusion

No known studies have been conducted on strategies to recruit urban African American fathers to parenting programs. It is known, however, that these fathers face numerous challenges to maintaining consistent, high-quality relationships with their children. Further, high-quality father-child relationships are known to produce positive outcomes for children. Parenting programs are an effective strategy for helping parents overcome challenges and improve parent-child relationships. Yet, fathers are extremely difficult to recruit into such programs. This study of urban African American fathers and fatherhood service providers suggest that overall, at least some fatherhood program providers are attuned to the perspectives of fathers – as evidenced by the consistencies in themes for the two groups. The challenge, therefore, is to broaden the use of these promising strategies by both father support agencies, as well as other family support and social service agencies. Word of mouth recruitment (especially using program graduates to recruit) is a promising practice that must be nurtured within programs. Instead of depending on it to occur naturally, agencies should provide guidance and materials to new program graduates that encourages and potentially incentivizes this recruitment technique. Increased advertising efforts and the production of marketing materials that reflect the unique needs of this population can be used to bridge the gap between program availability and lack of awareness of parenting programs that encourage father participation. Collaborations with the courts and other community agencies should be formed and cultivated to establish long standing relationship

that are not dependent on single individuals within agency but can withstand staff turnover. Offering parenting curricula along with other programming such as employment assistance is another valuable technique. This can be done within a single agency or through the development of partnerships between agencies with differing expertise (e.g., job training program teaming up with family support agency). Finally, efforts must be made to reduce logistical barriers to participation by offering transportation.

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Highlights

- Qualitative data from fathers and program providers revealed recruitment strategies
- Fathers: word-of-mouth, advertising they could relate to, providing transportation
- Providers: word-of-mouth, courts/agencies, offer parenting with other programming

Table 1

Characteristics of focus group participants

Characteristic	All Groups (N=29)	Group 1 (N=10)	Group 2 (N=5)	Group 3 (N=4)	Group 4 (N=8)	Group 5 (N=2)
Mean age in years (SD)	37.45 (5.29)	38.80 (7.60)	39.60 (2.22)	36.75 (2.71)	34.75 (2.71)	37.50 (2.12)
Marital Status (%)						
Single	51.72	60.00	60.00	50.00	50.00	50.00
Married or with partner	13.79	10.00	20.00	0.00	25.00	0.00
Divorced or Separated	34.48	30.00	20.00	50.00	25.00	50.00
Widowed	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Employment (%)						
Employed	37.93	40.00	60.00	50.00	12.5	50.00
Unemployed	62.07	60.00	40.00	50.00	87.5	50.00
Education (%)						
Less than HS	3.45	0.00	0.00	0.00	12.5	0.00
Some HS	17.24	20.00	20.00	0.00	25.00	0.00
HS or GED degree	51.72	50.00	40.00	75.00	50.00	50.00
Some college	17.24	20.00	40.00	0.00	12.50	0.00
College degree	6.90	0.00	0.00	25.00	0.00	50.00
Graduate degree	3.45	10.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00